

**THE MYTH OF THE ANDROGYNE IN LEONE EBREO'S
DIALOGUES OF LOVE**

by Rossella Pescatori

Published for the first time in Rome in 1535, Leone Ebreo's *Dialogues of Love* is certainly a seminal work in the context of the Renaissance. Due to its eclectic character, which spanned ethical, mythological, philosophical, and theological topics, it was a book that captured a tremendous audience, achieving renown as one of the most read books in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, influencing many different figures, such as painters, courtesans and literate noblewomen, poets, intellectuals, and philosophers.¹ The philosophical value of Leone's *Dialogues* has been rediscovered in the last few decades through the work of brilliant scholars who brought to light important elements of his thought. The focus of this essay is to examine one of the principal elements of Leone's philosophical system: a cosmic androgyny of Kabbalistic derivation.

The *Dialogues*² were composed by Leone Ebreo, whose real name was Judah Abravanel.³ The Abravanel moved to Italy after the expulsion (1492) of the Jews from Spain, and settled first in Naples, and then

¹ Significant among these are Tullia D'Aragona (*Dialogo De Infinità D'Amore*), Vittoria Colonna's poems, Pietro Aretino (*Il Filosofo*, 1546), Torquato Tasso (*Dialogo sull'Amore*), Miguel de Cervantes (*Don Quijote de la Mancha*), and John Donne's poems. Indeed, the *Dialogues* could be an easy source of information on the meaning of mythological subjects and allegories. See my "Images and Simulacra of the Soul: Reading Female Allegory In Veronese's Paintings, and Leone Ebreo's Dialogues," forthcoming in *Cadernos de Estudos Sefarditas* (Lisbon 2007).

² Thanks to the latest research of James Nelson Novoa, "New Documents regarding the publication of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*" (forthcoming 2007), we now know for certain that Leone did not bring his work to the original publisher, Antonio Blado D'Assola, himself. The dedication of the first edition was written by Mariano Lenzi, who claimed to have brought this wonderful work "out of the shadows" in order to repay his debts to Madonna Aurelia Petrucci with a work that was worthy of her prestige and virtue. See also J. W. Nelson Novoa, *Los Diálogos de Amore de León Hebreo en el Marco Sociocultural Sefardí del siglo XVI* (Lisbon 2006).

³ The name "Leone Ebreo" was identified for the first time with Yehudah Abarbanel, son of Isaac Abravanel, in 1568 by the author—probably Gedalia Ibn Yahya—of the first Spanish translation of the *Dialogues*: *LOS DIALOGOS DE AMOR DE MESTRE LEON ABARBANEL MEDICO Y FILOSOFO EXCELENTE*. De Nuevo Traduzidos en lengua castellana, y deregidos ala Maiestad del Rey Filippo (Venice 1568). In 1551 Baruch Uziel Chesqueto had mentioned Yehudah Abravanel as the extremely bright author of a work in Italian (without mentioning the title) in his introduction to a new printed edition of Isaac Abravanel's *The Source of Salvation*.

in other Italian cities. We know little about Leone's life and movements; after Naples he probably lived briefly in Genoa, then in the first years of the 1500 he was again in Naples, then Venice, then possibly he returned to Naples

In light of its dialogue form, Neoplatonic content, and richness of classical mythological reference, the *Dialogues* seems to be directed toward the same audience that Christian philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Francesco Cattani da Diaccetto also address. Ficino's *Commentarium in Convivium De Amore*⁴ as well as its Italian translation, *El Libro dell'Amor* in 1468, were certainly of particular significance for the organization of the Leone's content, not only with respect to the main topics, but also in terms of the theoretical frameworks used to discuss them. Many of the theoretical points are also related to other works of Ficino. For example, the notion of "anima mundi" that is in the *Dialogues* echoes Ficino in the *Theologia platonica de immortalitate animorum* (1482), and the discussions of astral influences and the possible uses of astrology is certainly connected to Ficino's *De Vita* (1489). In addition to Ficino, the *Dialogues* are certainly also influenced by Pico della Mirandola, especially the *Heptaplus* (1489) and the *Commento sopra la Canzona D'amore di Benivieni* (ca. 1485). These two works have so many points in common with Leone's *Dialogues* that the latter seems to be a reworking of them with a more precise and theoretical organization. In fact in Pico we find, in great measure, the same extraordinary syncretism that succeeds in reconciling the sensitive and intelligible realms of Plato, the heavenly and sublunary spheres of Aristotle, the three divine emanations of Plotinus (the *nous*, the world-soul, and the world of the senses), and also use of the Kabbalah.⁵ The *Dialogues*, then, cannot be seen as separate from the works of Giovanni Pico, and his Jewish

⁴ Marsilio Ficino completed his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, the *De Amore*, in 1474–1475. Benivieni composed his *Canzona D'Amore* in 1484, and Pico della Mirandola wrote his *Commento* on that song shortly after. The *Asolani* by Pietro Bembo appeared in 1505; at the end of the 15th c. there were also the *Panegirico dell'Amore* by Francesco Cattani da Diaccetto, and the *Libro della natura d'Amore* by Mario Equicola.

⁵ The analogy of the microcosm-macrocosm is in fact central to Kabbalistic theories, which consider the Torah as a living organism. Moreover, the Torah is often compared to the "tree of life," which has roots, a trunk, branches, and bark that together form a unified entity. As with the discrepancies in the Torah that are unified in the name of God, each aspect of his creation is revealed in the objects of this world. In fact, the Torah appears in various forms in the different cycles of creation, *shemmitot*, which provoke continuous mutations that nevertheless are unable to ultimately change its structure.

teacher, Alemanno, with his works the *Immortale* and *The Song of Solomon's Ascents*. It therefore seems that Leone wished to give his own contribution to the new intellectual and philosophic movement so vivid and popular in Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This new movement sustained the notion of *sophia perennis*.⁶

The *Dialogues of Love* comprises three conversations,⁷ which are entitled "On Love and Desire," "On the community of Love," and "On the origins of Love," and are enacted over a period of three successive days. They are organized in a dialogic format, which is not a philosophic diatribe but rather more like a theatrical representation, under the guise of a courtship between a man, lover, and teacher, Philo, and a woman, beloved, and pupil, Sophia. The discussion, in a truly encyclopedic way, covers different topics that have as their common denominator the idea of Love.

The relationship between the characters is determined by a series of polarities, the most striking of which is their gender difference. They are not only male and female, lover and beloved, but also materiality and spirituality, the desire to acquire knowledge and the inability to reach it. Their figures cipher the entire content of the work on different levels. Their names even imply their functions, for "Sophia," the immaterial or divine knowledge, is pursued by "Philo," the lover, the one who seeks knowledge because he loves it, or rather her. Sophia exemplifies the traditionally weak or passive role of woman, the one who does not know and wants to receive a lesson from someone wiser than her. Philo represents the truly wise scholar who is possessed by an insatiable desire for knowledge and thirst for wisdom—"sete di sapienza"—which moves him to find a cure for his incurable and continuous deficiency.⁸

⁶ Leone Ebreo in a way retraces the steps of Philo of Alexandria (30 B.C.E.–50 C.E.) who wanted to apply the categories of Greek philosophy to the Bible in order to show that these two sets of knowledge were not separate, but rather united, by divine law.

⁷ It seems that Leone Ebreo had in mind a fourth dialogue on the effects of love. The third dialogue concludes with Philo saying that there is no space and time to discuss the topic of the effects of love, but that another day he will start this new conversation with Sophia. We do not know whether Leone ever wrote this fourth dialogue; there are no surviving editions. See D. Harari, "The Traces of the Missing Fourth Dialogue on Love by Judah Abravanel Known as Leone Ebreo," *Italia* 7.1–2 (1988) 93–155.

⁸ This name recalls Philo of Alexandria. See R. A. Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female* (Leiden 1970); J. J. Vila-Chã, "Amor Intellectus? Leone Ebreo (Judah Abravanel) and the Intelligibility of Love" (Ph.D. diss., Boston College 1998); and D. T. Runia, *Exegesis and Philosophy: Studies on Philo of Alexandria*. (Aldershot and Brookfield, VT 1990).

Sophia is the cause of Philo's desperate love. Not reciprocating his feelings, she is felt by him to be the one who gives health and poison at the same time. She is both truth and falsehood when she becomes "vitiū corruptae imaginationes," and "signum melencoliae," or rather an obsession for Philo's enchanted mind. But also Philo's arguments seem directed toward Sophia's seduction; often his speech seems genuine, but at other times it is quite ambiguous. Leone's extraordinary idea is to use a conversation which paradoxically is moved by "materialistic love" to produce a discussion about "pure" and "heavenly" love. Yet all the conversations of the *Dialogues* have a philosophic character, present to such an extent that it is fair to assert that Leone Ebreo's ultimate goal is to present his own philosophical system, correctly defined as *Philographia*, literally the "depiction" or "portrayal" of love.⁹ The structure of the *Dialogues* reveals a theoretical plan that follows the same medieval Neoplatonic Alexandrine tradition, which continues Boethius's theorizations explicitly used by Ficino and Pico. Therefore the first dialogue, *On Love and Desire*, represents the first and lowest level of an intellectual itinerary connecting the "Love" thematic to a practical and concrete dimension which deals with ethical or political issues. The second dialogue, *On The Universality of Love*, represents the second step, and in effect its content involves a natural character emanating from physics and mythological matters connected to cosmology and astrology. The third dialogue, *On the Origin of Love*, is the third and more elevated step that treats divine matters, metaphysics, and theology. Aristotle's philosophy is the first level of an itinerary that ends in a metaphysics formulated as a Platonic revelation of Holy Scripture. Yet Leone seems to follow the same curricular trajectory of Arab Neoplatonists, medievalists, and his contemporaries such as Ficino, Pico, and Yohanan Alemanno. In the *Dialogues* Aristotelianism (Christian, Arabic, and Jewish, referring to the nuances given by St. Thomas Aquinas, Averroes, Avicenna, and Maimonides), Platonism, and Neoplatonism (in particular Ficino and his followers) are combined in a system that has as a unifying background the mysticism taken from the Kabbalah, in particular that contained in the book of the Zohar.¹⁰

⁹ The second Spanish translation has in its title *Philographía universal de todo el mundo, de los Diálogos de León Hebreo*. Traducida de italiano en español, corregida y añadida por Micer Carlos Montesa (Zaragoza 1584).

¹⁰ *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("the Book of Radiance") emerged mysteriously in Spain toward the end of the 13th c. It is a commentary on the Torah, the five books of Moses, and is writ-

Let us start with *Bereshit*. The book of Genesis opens with this term, traditionally translated as “In the beginning.” Leone writes:

Philo: The first words which Moses wrote were, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” And where we say *in the beginning* the ancient Chaldean interpretation said “with wisdom God created the heaven and the earth,” because wisdom in Hebrew is called the *beginning*, as Solomon says, “the beginning is wisdom,” and for the word “in” we can say “with.” See how the very first words show the world to have been created by wisdom, and that wisdom was the first creative force, although it was the most high God, the creator, who through his supreme wisdom first created beauty and made the whole created universe beautiful. In this way the first words of the wise Moses denoted the three degrees of the Beautiful: God, Wisdom, and World. And the most wise King Solomon, as the follower and disciple of the divine Moses, declares in the first of his Proverbs: “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; with his highest science he established the heavens. By his knowledge the depths were broken up, and the heavens drop down the dew.” And therefore he instructs, saying: “My son, let not them depart from your eyes: see and observe the highest contemplations, which will be the life of your soul,” etc. This could not be written more clearly.¹¹

ten in the form of a mystical novel. In the Zohar are found the directives of the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. See R. Feldman, *Fundamentals of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah* (California 1999); M. Idel “Interpretations of the kabbalah,” in D. Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York and London 1992); M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation*. (New Haven and London 2002); G. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah, Mysticism, and Talmudic tradition*. (New York 1965). For the book of the Zohar I refer to the excellent edition *Sefer ha-Zohar*, trans. and commentary by D. C. Matt (Stanford 2004). For reason of space, I quote only the reference and the page number. As Idel (2002) documents, the Italian Kabbalah was very different from the Spanish. In Spain the main theorizations of Kabbalah were connected to a “mythical dimension” which emphasized the theosophical-theurgical meaning of the Bible and in particular of Jewish law. Italian theosophical Kabbalah underlined the unity and simplicity of divine emanation and how human intellect could receive and comprehend this; thus it was easily assimilated by non-Jewish thinkers, and Kabbalah started collecting elements taken from philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, and Neoplatonic thinkers. At the beginning of the 16th c. there was already a process of cultural integration between Christianity and Judaism, wherein intellectuals shared their knowledge and worked together towards a *sophia perennis*.

¹¹ “Filone: Le prime parole che Moise scrisse furono: « In principio creò Dio il cielo e la terra »; e l’antica interpretazione caldea disse, onde noi diciamo in principio, « con sapienza creò Dio il cielo e la terra »: e perché la sapienza si dice in ebraico principio (come disse Salamone), principio è sapienza, e la dizione in può dire cum. Mira come [per] la prima cosa ne mostra che ‘l mondo fu creato per sapienza e che la sapienza, fu il primo principio creante, ma che ‘l sommo Dio creatore mediante la sua somma sapienza, prima bellezza, creò e fece bello tutto l’universo creato: sì che li primi vocabuli del sapiente Moise ne denotarono li tre gradi del bello, Dio sapienza e mondo. E il sapientissimo re Salamone, come seguace e discepolo del divino Moise, dichiara questa sua prima sentenza ne li Proverbi dicendo: « Il Signor con sapienza fondò la terra, compose li cieli

This interpretation is not new; it is already present in Philo of Alexandria, and Azriel of Gerona, and it was common in some *midrashim* is also contained in the book of Zohar.¹² Nevertheless, Leone's interpretation is associated with other important elements. In fact we notice that God, wisdom, and world are characterized by precise sexual genders. From an initial androgynous condition appears first a male generative principle (God, father), which produces effects on a receptive component (Wisdom, mother).

Divine Wisdom is an entity that proceeds from the same absolute principle that exists before the creation of the universe, and creation could happen only because there was a division in that indistinct entity. Leone explains creation of the whole universe, relating this to the love relationship that exists between God and his Wisdom. Creation can be explained as the expression of the extrinsic manifestation of the love that is immanent in the very essence of God, whose effects produce the creatures of the world.¹³

con somma scienza; col suo intelletto l'abissi fūno rotti e li cieli stillano la rosata ». Onde egli dottrina dicendo: « Figliuolo mio, non le levare dinanzi a l'occhi tuoi: vedi e guarda le somme cogitazioni, le quali saranno vita de l'anima tua »; e non si potria già questa cosa scrivere più chiara." Dialogo terzo, ed. G. Manuppella, *Diálogos de Amor, vol. 1: Texto Italiano, Notas e Documentos* (Lisbon 1983) 302. The English translations are from Leone Ebreo, *Dialogues of Love*, trans. R. Pescatori and C. D. Bacich, intro. and notes by R. Pescatori, afterward by C. D. Bacich, Da Ponte Collection (forthcoming Toronto 2008).

¹² See Zohar 1.3 b. Rabbi Yudai said, "What is Be-reshit? With Wisdom. This is the Wisdom on which the world stands—through which one enters hidden, high mysteries. Here were engraved six vast, supernatural dimensions, from which everything emerges, from which issued six springs and steams, flowing into the immense ocean. This bara shit, created six, created from here. Who created them? The unmentioned, the hidden unknown." Zohar, ed. Matt (n. 10 above) 17.

¹³ "Filone: Ancor questo ti dirò, per satisfazione tua. Sai che Salamone e gli altri teologi mosaici tengono che 'l mondo sia prodotto a modo di figlio dal sommo bello come padre e da essa somma sapienzia, vera bellezza, come di madre; e dicono che, la somma sapienzia innamorata del sommo bello come femmina del perfettissimo maschio, e il sommo bello reciprocando l'amore in lei, essa s'ingravidà de la somma potestà col sommo bello e parturisce il bello universo, loro figlio, con tutte sue parti. E questa è la significazione de l'innamoramento che Salamone dice ne la Cantica, de la sua compagna col bellissimo amato, e perché egli ha prima e più ragion d'amato in lei, per esser suo principio e produttore, che ella in lui per essere prodotta e inferiore a quello, però vedrai che ella chiama sempre lui 'mio amato' come inferiore a superiore, e lui non la chiama mai 'amata' ma 'compagna mia, colomba mia, perfetta mia, sorella mia' come superiore a inferiore. Però che lei con l'amore di lui si fa perfetta, e leva la sterilità ingravidandosi, e parturisce la perfezione de l'universo: ma l'amore in lui non è per acquistare perfezione, però che non se li può aggiugnere, ma per acquistarla a l'universo, generandolo come figlio d'ambidue; benché ancora in lui resulti perfezione relativa, ché 'l perfetto figlio fa perfetto padre, ma non essenziale e reale come fa in essa bellezza. E a immagine

The key terms of Leone's philosophical and cosmologic system are two opposite gender polarities, the feminine and the masculine, that can be united through love. Their attraction and union prevent the system from collapsing. This happens for all the different levels of the reality, the world, the reign of intellect, the reign of heaven. Pagan myths and biblical stories offer, as receptacle of revealed and universal truth, a way to better understand our cosmos. Yet Plato and the Bible shared a common myth, that of the androgyne. What Aristophanes says in Plato's *Symposium* is confirmed in Genesis,¹⁴ according to an interpretation that echoes the one offered in the Zohar.¹⁵

Philo: It means that Adam, that is the "first man," whom God created on the sixth day of the Creation, being a human individual, containing in himself male and female without division; and therefore the text says that God created Adam in his own likeness, "male and female created he them." And at one time it speaks of Adam in the singular as a man (Adam, one man), at another in the plural ("male and female he created them")—to denote that, being one individual, he contained in himself both male and female. Wherefore the ancient Jewish commentators in their Chaldean language say here, "Adam was created of two persons, the one part male the other female." Moreover, the last text, which says that God created Adam male and female and called their name Adam, they interpret as meaning that Adam alone contained both sexes, and that there was first an individual called Adam, because the woman was never called Eve until she was separated from the male, Adam. And this was the source of that ancient androgyne of Plato and the Greeks who was half man and half woman. Then we come to the saying of God: "It is not good that man should be alone. I will make a helper before him." And this means that it did not seem good that Adam, male and female, should be contained in one single body, joined at the shoulders, with the faces turned in opposite directions; but it was better that the woman should be divided from him, and that they should come face to face, that she might be a helpmate for him. And God made a trial of man by bringing all the beasts of the field and the

di questo si produce del maschio perfetto e [de] la femmina imperfetta l'individuo umano, che è microcosmo, cioè picciolo mondo; e ancora in cielo è il sole e la luna, che a modo d'uomo e donna innamorati, come t'ho detto, generano tutte le cose nel mondo inferiore.

Sofia: È adunque l'amoroso matrimonio de l'uomo e de la donna simulacro del sacro e divino matrimonio del sommo bello e [de] la somma bellezza, di che tutto l'universo proviene. Se non che, è differenza ne la somma bellezza, che non solamente è moglie del sommo bello, ma prima figliuola prodotta da lui." Dialogo terzo, ed. Manuppella (n. 11 above) 306.

¹⁴ See also M. Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven 2005). Idel (89) claims that Leone's reference to "Chaldean commentary" is plausibly referring to Zohar.

¹⁵ See Zohar 1:15a, 1:29a; ed. Matt (n. 10 above) 109–118 and 170–176.

birds before him to see if he would be content with any of the female species as his mate. And Adam named each of the animals after its own kind, but he did not find any satisfactory helper or consort. Therefore [God] caused a sleep to fall upon him, and took one of his sides (the word in Hebrew being equivalent to rib, but here and elsewhere it stands for “side”), that is, the side or feminine person who was behind Adam's shoulders. And he separated it from Adam, and filled up the place of the division with flesh. And of this side he made the woman, separate from man, who was called Eve only when she was divided from him and not before, when she was a side and part of Adam. When God had made her he presented her to Adam, awakened from sleep, who then said: “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called *woman*, because she was taken out of man.” And it continues saying, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” Which means that man and woman, being two divided halves of a single carnal individual, come together again as one body and individual in marriage and coitus. From here Plato took the division of the androgyne into two separate halves, male and female, and of the birth of love, which is the inclination remaining in each of the two halves to be made whole and reunited with the rest of the body. You will, however, find this difference between the two versions: Moses holds the division to be for the better, because he says, “It is not good that man should be alone; let us make a helper worthy of him.” And after the division he tells of the first sin of Adam and Eve through eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil, for which they each received a distinct punishment. But Plato holds that man first sinned when joined together as male and female, and the punishment was this division into two halves, as you have already heard.¹⁶

¹⁶ “Filone: ... Vuol dire che Adam, cioè l'uomo primo, il qual Dio creò nel dì sesto de la creazione, essendo un supposto umano conteneva in sé maschio e femmina senza divisione; e però dice che « Dio creò Adam ad immagine di Dio, maschio e femmina creò quelli »: una volta il chiama in singulare (Adam, uno uomo), l'altra volta il chiama in plurale (« maschio e femmina creò quelli »), per denotare che, sendo un supposto, conteneva maschio e femmina insieme. Però comentano qui li comentari ebraici antichi in lingua caldea¹⁶, dicendo: « Adam di due persone fu creato, d'una parte maschio, da l'altra femmina »; e questo dichiara ne l'ultimo il testo, dicendo che Dio creò Adam maschio e femmina, e chiamò il nome loro Adam, che dichiarò solo Adam contenere tutti due, e che prima un supposto fatto d'ambidue si chiamava Adam, però che non si chiamò mai la femmina Eva, fin che non fu divisa dal suo maschio Adam; dal quale pigliarono Platone e li greci quello androgeno antico, mezzo maschio e mezzo femmina. Di poi dice Dio: « Non è buono che l'uomo sia solo; facciànli aiutorio in fronte di lui »; cioè che non pareva che stessi bene Adam maschio e femmina in un corpo solo, colligato di spalle con contra viso, ché era meglio che la femmina fusse divisa, e che venisse in fronte a lui viso a viso, per poterli essere aiutorio. E per fare esperimento di lui, gli portò gli animali terrestri, per vedere se si contentaria con alcuna de le femmine degli animali per sua compagnia; ed egli pose il nome a ciascuno degli animali secondo le sue proprie nature, e non trovò alcuno sufficiente per esserli aiutorio e consorte. Onde [Dio] l'addormentò, e pigliò uno de li suoi lati (il quale in ebraico è vocabulo equivoco a 'costella', ma qui e in altre parti ancora sta per 'lato'), cioè il lato o persona femminile, che era dietro a le spalle di Adam,

Leone's interpretation of the androgyne myth in relation to Genesis 1.26–27 confirms Ficino's positions taken in *De Amore* at a more elevated symbolic level. Also here the Zohar is the implicit background.¹⁷ As Naomi Yavneh noticed,¹⁸ one of the most striking and central features of the *Dialogues* is indeed the “depiction of a dualistic cosmos governed by a system that is universally hermaphrodite: whereas *eros* is the *copula mundi* of Neoplatonic cosmology, Leone explicitly depicts *copula* as heterosexual copulation. Not only is the universe divided between masculine, active, and incorporeal and the feminine, passive, and corporeal, but these two sets of elements are depicted in terms of anthropomorphic sexuality in which they continually seek union.”¹⁹ Leone is very clear in comparing the prime matter of the universe to the feminine earth, for example, presenting it as the *ricettaculo* (receptacle) of all the influences of the heavens, her *maschio* (male), and this can be summarized in the Platonic Androgyne myth, which is read by Leone and reinterpreted through the Kabbalistic tradition.

Leone's interpretation of the human condition is centered upon the assumption that only when a man and a woman are together as one being are they truly in the image of Adam, and thus of God. Androgyny is already present in God, and man was made in his image and likeness,

e la divise da esso Adam, e suppli di carne la vacuità del luogo diviso, e quel lato fece donna separata; la quale si chiama Eva poi che fu divisa, e non prima, ché allora era lato e parte di Adam. E fatta lei, Dio la presentò ad esso Adam risvegliato dal sonno, ed egli disse: « Questa in questa volta è osso di mie ossa e carne de mia carne; questa si chiamerà virago, perché da l'uomo fu pigliata ». E continua dicendo: « però lascerà l'uomo il padre e [la] madre, e si colligarà con sua mogliera, e sarà per carne una: cioè che, per essere divisi da un medesimo individuo, l'uomo e la donna si tornano a reintegrare nel matrimonio e coito in uno medesimo supposto carnale e individuale ». Di qui pigliò Platone la divisione de l'androgeno in dui mezzi separati, maschio e femmina, e il nascimento de l'amore, che è l'inclinazione che resta a ciascuno de li due mezzi a reintegrarsi col suo resto ed essere per carne una. Questa differenza troverai fra l'uno e l'altro, che Moise pone la divisione per meglio (però che dice: « Non è buono che l'uomo sia solo; facciànli aiutorio in fronte di lui »), e di poi de la divisione narra il primo peccato di Adam ed Eva per mangiare de l'arbore proibito di saper bene e male, per il quale a ciascuno fu data pena propria; ma Platone dice che prima l'uomo peccò, essendo congiunto di maschio e femmina, e in pena del peccato fu diviso in dui mezzi (secondo hai inteso).” Dialogo terzo, ed. Manuppella (n. 11 above) 253–254.

¹⁷ See Zohar, 1; 37b, 1; ed. Matt (n. 10 above) 236–239

¹⁸ N. Yavneh, “The spiritual eroticism of Leone's hermaphrodite,” in M. C. Brink, A. P. Horowitz, and J. R. Coudert, eds., *Playing with gender: A Renaissance Pursuit* (Urbana 1991) 85–98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 86. Yavneh, however, is not precisely defining “universal hermaphroditism” that is instead “universal androgyny.” Leone distinguishes in the Second Dialogue between “androgyne” and “hermaphrodite,” giving a hybrid nature to the second.

so he/she contains the same components. Leone's position is related to the Zohar, where it is said that love, and love alone, has the capacity to purify the human soul and lead it back to God. This love originates in the "circolo amoroso" (love circle) of Creation, whose origin is love itself, which finally returns to God; and for God alone man finds happiness and fulfillment. This idea is expressed by Sofia when she says in the third dialogue:

... I have now true knowledge that love was born in the universe, first to increase in ordered succession its production, and then to bless it with its higher pleasure by procuring its union with the supreme Good, or its first beginning.²⁰

In the Kabbalah, Wisdom (Sophia) is a feminine figure. The Kabbalah always tends to present divine Wisdom in a close relationship with the creation of the world. The article of faith according to which "God created the world out of nothing"²¹ is interpreted by the Kabbalistic tradition in such a way that this "nothing" refers to the material world. With Wisdom God creates the world out of nothing; and because of this, the wisdom of God becomes identified with the first matter, which is the formless principle that gives origin to everything created and thus can be found in everything that exists. So, wisdom reveals itself as the medium for what can be called the power of God. Connected with both God and the World, Wisdom-Sophia appears in Leone as symbolic of what has been called the eternal feminine, that mysterious reality in which, according to the Zohar, the women of the world participate.²²

Philo: ... God is neither formed, nor does he have form, but is the supreme absolute form from which Chaos and all its parts take their form. And the world together with every part of it was made and formed from both. Their father is that divine formality, and the mother is the Chaos, both from eternity. But the perfect father produced out of himself the single substance, and imperfect mother, and all worlds are made and formed anew out of both, their children, in which matter is

²⁰ "Conosco veramente che l'amor nacque ne l'universo prima per ampliare successivamente la sua produzione e poi per bearlo con soma delectazione, inducendo l'unione sua col sommo Buono, primo principio suo." Dialogo terzo, ed. Manuppella (n. 11 above) 327.

²¹ See also I. Abravanel, *Commentaire du récit de la création (Gen, I, 1-6, 8). Perouch' al haTorah Breréchet*, trans. U. Schiffers (Paris 1999).

²² Zohar 1:48 b 262-268, 1; 49a, 269-271; 1:49b, 272-274.

combined with paternal formality. This is why Plato asserts, not without reason, that Chaos was created by God from eternity, and that the world with its parts is made and formed anew by him in the Creation²³.

In the Zohar the androgyny of the primordial human being is clearly attested; Adam Kadmon reflects the gender bipolarity of the Godhead. In the name of God, יהוה (IHVH) the Kabbalist reads י (yod, I) Father, ה (he, H) Mother, and בה (bet, he, VH) the cosmic androgyne, or Son-Daughter, which are created united back to back, but separated in the evolution of the cosmos; they are meant to be reconnected face to face. יה (IH) is the primary manifestation of God; בה (VH) is their further unification.²⁴ This is also reconnected to the “alchemical” aspect of human evolution. Adam Kadmon was made of three of the four elements; earth, air, and water. Afterwards God decided that “it was not good that man was alone” (Genesis 2.18), and therefore from one of his ribs created the woman. Rib, “costola/costella,” in the *Dialogues* is read as “side.” So according to this interpretation, Adam was separated into two beings of different and opposite gender. At this time a change of words occurred; Adam—human being—was replaced with איש *ish* = man (written alef-yod-shin) and אשה *ishah* = woman (written alef-shin-he). In the Zohar it is written that at this moment, when man and woman were separated, the element fire was added to their beings.²⁵ This element is indicated by “alef-shin” in their new names; *Esh* is fire. Yet paradoxically, the separation of genders is the fulfillment of creation. In the Kabbalah, *Yod* represents the male principle of semen and energy, while *He* represents the female principle of being as container and the time that could provide a shape. Both these elements are necessary to the image of God.

Philo: ... This is clearly exemplified in the saying of the devout king David: “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the

²³ “Filone: ... Dio non è formato né ha forma, ma è somma forma in se stessa; dal quale il caos e ogni parte sua partecipa forma: e d’ambi si fece il mondo formato e ogni parte sua formata, il padre de’ quali è quella divina formalità e la madre è il caos, ambo ab eterno. Ma il perfetto padre produsse da sé la sola sostanza, imperfetta madre, e d’ambi son fatti e formati di nuovo tutti li mondani figliuoli, quali hanno con la materia la formalità paterna: sì che per questa ragion non vana afferma Platone che ‘l caos è prodotto da Dio ab eterno e ch’ il mondo con sue parti è fatto e formato da lui di novo ne la creazione.” Dialogo terzo, ed. Manuppella (n. 11 above) 208.

²⁴ E. Zolla, *L’androgino: l’umana nostalgia dell’interezza*, trans. of A. Sabbadini, *The Androgyne, Fusion of the sexes*. (London 1981, 1989).

²⁵ See Zohar 1;48b, 1;49a in D.C. Matt, ed. 2004; p. 268, 270.

host of them by the breath of his mouth.” The Word is wisdom, and is like the breath which goes out from the mouth, so wisdom proceeds from the first wise Being; and wisdom and the wise are not one and the same, as Aristotle maintains.²⁶

In addition to this, *Yod* and *He* symbolize the *sefirot* of *Hokhmah* (Wisdom, in potency) and *Binah* (comprehension, or Wisdom in act), which are the primordial parents at the top the tree of life. With their eternal loving embrace they produce the cosmos. By analogy the human soul is composed of these two polarities: an Animus which drives toward the intellect, and an Anima which gives life.

At the center of the *Dialogues* is the Kabbalistic doctrine of the mystical union of love, which Leone transformed into a very powerful element of the philosophical foundation of his system. For Leone, primordial androgyny was first of all a lack of the power of division and a situation of undifferentiated immobility. The split between the two genders creates a tension that is the fecund force of the universe itself. The same principle of division is at work between signifier and signified, between form and content, between *fabula* and *historia* this is what makes possible a cosmos and also our reality. The drama of creation is the story of a paradoxical disintegration, a falling apart, which generated life and which implies continuous change—a multiplicity that is directed once again towards a unitary final destination. This androgyne figure, characterized by a “multiform unity,”²⁷ is the core of the *Dialogues*. This concept is materialized through the two interlocutors of Leone’s work: Philo and Sophia, a man and a woman, represent the two halves of the androgyne, which reunite to form the highest type of knowledge: Filo-Sofia.

Philo: ... Again it is undeniable that love presupposes knowledge; yet it does not follow from this that love is the ultimate activity of the soul. In fact you should know that, in regard to God, as other objects of love and desire, there are two forms of knowing. One precedes and causes love; but such cognition is not the knowledge that unifies perfectly. The other is caused by love; such cognition is unifying and is the result of the enjoyment of perfect union. So, in the first place, bread must be known, and because of this it is

²⁶ “Filone: ... E questo vedrai più chiaro nel detto del devoto re David, che dice: « Col verbo del signore li cieli fũro fatti, e col spirito de la bocca sua tutto l’esercito suo »; il verbo è la sapienza, e somiglia al spirito che esce de la bocca, ché così la sapienza emana dal primo sapiente, e non sono ambi una cosa medesima (come pone Aristotile).” Dialogo terzo, ed. Manuppella (n. 11 above) 299.

²⁷ This multiform unity could be identified with the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

loved and desired when we are hungry; and if we did not first have an ideal knowledge of it, we could neither love nor desire it. And by means of this love and desire we attain true unified cognition of the bread, namely, when we actually eat it. And the true knowledge of bread consists in tasting it. The same is true of the relation between men and women; in fact knowing her ideally causes love and desire, and from love comes the unified knowledge that is the goal of desire. So it is, too, with regard to whatever else we love and desire. In fact with regard to everything, love and desire are a means of raising us from imperfect knowledge to perfect union, which is the true goal of love and desire. These are affects of the will, which translate divided cognition into enjoyment of perfect cognitive union.²⁸

This “unitive cognition” is a type of knowledge that results from a desire, an emotion. In Hebrew it is named *Da’at* and, as the Bible attests, is referred to a “sexual” component. Furthermore *Da’at* refers to the mysterious eleventh *sefirah* that stay at the center of the tree of life.²⁹

One of the major components of the *Dialogues* is the process of loving knowledge; it permeates the work and, as such, is determined by the principle by which the object of knowledge is transformed by each and every act of knowing. Heterosexual union (called *Copulazione* by Leone) is the fundamental analogy used in this philosophy of love. Leone, establishing a relationship between “knowledge” and “love,”

²⁸ “Filone: ... Ancor non si può negare che l’amore presuppone conoscimento; ma non per questo segue che l’amore sia l’ultimo atto de l’anima. Perché tu puoi sapere che di Dio [e di] tutte le cose amate e desiderate si trovano di due sorte di conoscere. L’una è innanzi de l’amore causato da quella, la quale non è cognizione perfettamente unitiva. L’altra è dipoi de l’amore, da l’amore causata: la qual cognizione unitiva è fruizione di perfetta unione; ché ‘l primo conoscimento del pane fa che l’ami e desiderer chi ha fame; ché, se prima non lo conoscessi esemplarmente, non lo potria amare e desiderare. E mediante questo amore e desiderio veniamo a la vera cognizione unitiva del pane, la quale è quando in atto si mangia: ché la vera cognizione del pane è gustarlo. E così accade de l’uomo con la donna: che conoscendola esemplarmente s’ama e desidera, e da l’amore si viene al conoscimento unitivo che è il fine del desiderio. E così è in ogni altra cosa amata e desiderata: ché in tutte l’amore e desiderio è mezzo che ci leva da l’imperfetto conoscimento a la perfetta unità che è il vero fine d’amore e desiderio; quali sono affetti de la volontà che fanno, de la divisa cognizione, fruizione di cognizione perfetta e unita.” Dialogo primo, Manuppella (n. 11 above) 36.

²⁹ It is interesting to note that *Da’at* is associated with the task of making possible the creation of the world.

asserts a cognitive-emotive system based on the fundamental role of feelings, passion, and emotions.³⁰

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³⁰ Emotions and feelings contain strong cognitive and motivational components that predispose an individual to receive or search for exterior objects. This is the core of Leone's theory of desire.